

Sunrise along Pony Express trail in Utah's desert, left, shows the stark country at its best. Below, the station at Simpson Springs still stands.



Deseret News photos by Arlene Braithwaite

Along Utah's old Pony Express trail

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FAIRFIELD, Utah County — WANTED: Young,



Indian raids, searing heat
were all part of job for
young riders who covered
the Pony Express trail

squaws became ill. The braves thought their
women had been deliberately poisoned and swore
revenge.

Only the timely arrival of a friendly chief saved the
day.

...himmy, wily fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred.

This ad, that appeared in a San Francisco paper in 1860, heralded the beginning of one of the most colorful chapters in western history: the Pony Express.

From April 3, 1860, to Oct. 24, 1861, riders thundered at breakneck speed between St. Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento, Calif., carrying the mail and bringing the news.

The 2,000 miles were rough, tough and unrelenting.

Bitter snowstorms, searing heat, Indian raids were all in a day's work for teen-agers such as Buffalo Bill Cody who signed up for the job.

However, dangers and inconveniences dimmed in the sight of a little spending money and wild west adventure.

And dozens of intrepid young men put their hands on the Holy Bible, that belonged to Alexander Majors, and took a solemn oath not to swear, drink or engage in other ungentlemanly conduct while riding with the Pony Express.

Mr. Majors, a strict, bearded Calvinist, was one third of the eastern freighting company called Russell, Majors and Waddell.

The other two involved with the firm — William H. Russell, a speculator and gambler at heart, and William B. Waddell, who spent most of his time trying to hold the enterprise together and bail it out of financial difficulty.

From the beginning, Majors and Waddell were far less enthusiastic about the scheme to start a Pony Express than was their crony Russell.

He was the visionary, the impossible dreamer, the man who never worried about what they would do if things went wrong.

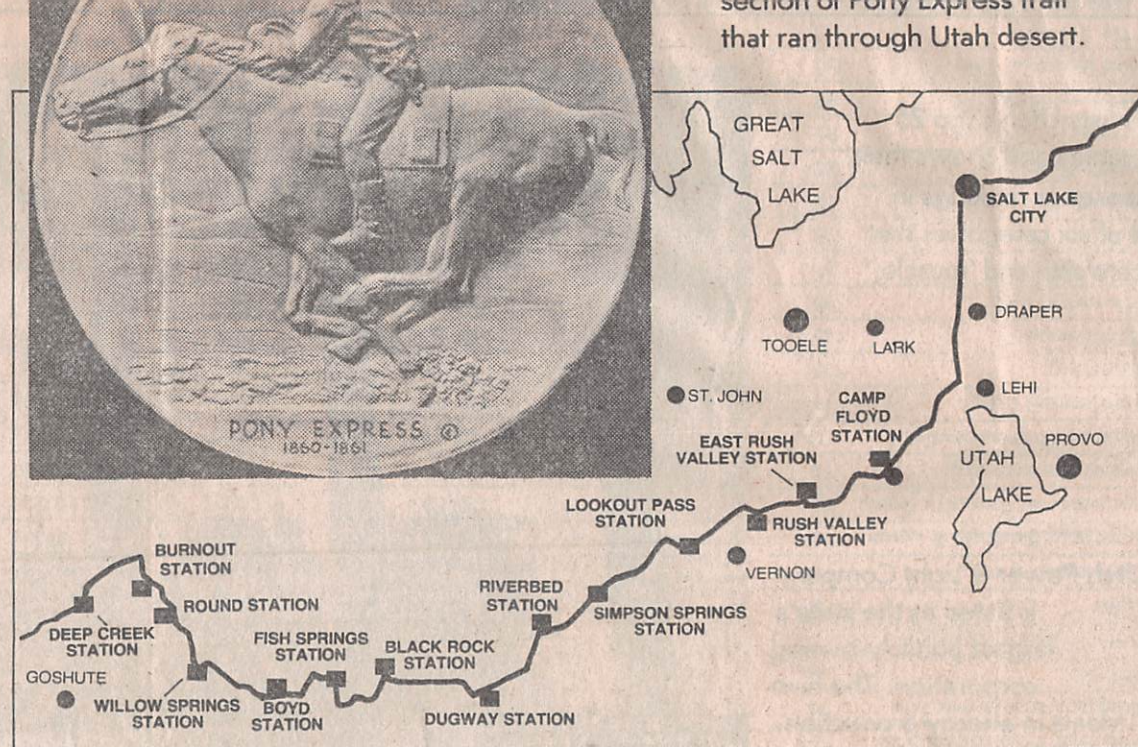
He was completely convinced that his firm could carry the mail through to San Francisco in less time than the Butterfield Overland Mail Stage, and thereby nail down a lucrative government contract. (Butterfield's average time: 21-23 days.)

Never listening to the doubts of his partners, he hired 80 riders, bought 500 fast horses and built 120 adobe relay stations.

Soon the freighting company was galloping through to the West Coast in 10 days flat and sending riders from California to Missouri with equal dispatch.

Over the years, Mr. Russell's brainchild delivered 35,000 pieces of mail, made 300 runs and only lost one slim pouch of letters.

The only bad part about the business: The government contract and subsidy never came



through. And so the firm never made a cent!

Nevertheless, even through the Pony Express verged on bankruptcy — even though everyone was happy when the telegraph made the system obsolete — it left behind a rich legacy and a thousand tales of human bravery.

Some of the most exciting episodes in the Pony Express story were enacted in Utah's rugged western desert country — a trek that ran from Fairfield, where Johnson's Army camped, to the Nevada border.

Station stops such as Rush Valley, Lookout Pass and Simpson Springs were at about five to ten mile intervals.

And today, history buffs can follow the trail in passenger cars noting markers and ruins of old Pony Express buildings along the way.

Be advised: The road is dusty and bumpy. And there aren't any tourist accommodations.

But the route isn't nearly as inconvenient and lonely now as it was back in the old days.

Other than Pony Express station keepers who kept

section of Pony Express trail that ran through Utah desert.

fresh mounts in readiness, scarcely a friendly soul populated the area.

Plenty of unfriendly Indians did, though. And they were just waiting. . . .

George Washington Perkins, a young lad who earned fame as an Express rider, recorded this harrowing tale:

"Billy Fisher 'n' me were makin' part of a 300 mile ride from Ruby, Nev., to tell of an Indian outbreak.

"Redskins were everywhere along the trail paying us compliments with bullets and arrows. There was no way around, so we put the spurs to our horses and raced on to Simpson Springs.

"It was no easy job to keep the mail and news going in those days. But somebody had to do it."

It was no easy job to be a station keeper, either.

According to historians, Doc Faust and his wife, who kept the station at Rush Valley, had a number of close shaves.

One time Mrs. Faust gave two Indian women some freshly baked pies. Not being used to rich pastry, the

Other famous station keepers out in Utah's desert were Uncle Horace and Aunt Libby Rockwell who lived up by Lookout Pass.

They were especially fond of dogs, and today a little cemetery can be found near their station — markers lovingly inscribed with such names as Phoebe, Toby Tyler, Jenny Lind, Josephine Bonaparte — their canine pets.

Tales about the Rockwells and their four-footed friends are legion. A favorite that desert folks like to relate goes like this:

One day old Uncle Horace rode into town in a howling, blinding blizzard to get the local doctor.

Imagining that a family member was caught in a terrible medical emergency, the physician raced all the way out to Lookout Pass with his satchel.

Cuss words flew faster than the snowflakes when he found out that the "emergency case" was only a dog having puppies!

Other colorful characters — and a few eccentrics like the Rockwells who loved dogs — have come and gone along the old Pony Express route in Utah's isolated desert over the years.

Some are fairly recent.

Rangers at Fish Springs, once an Express landmark and now a reclaimed wildlife refuge, like to tell about James P. Harrison.

A hunter and trapper of expertise, Harrison lived in a little old shack on the property until he passed away at a ripe old age about a year ago.

No one was better read or could recite poetry more beautifully, rangers say. And when it came to science and philosophy — well, he knew it all. In fact, the man only had one fault. He never took a bath!

Not only trappers have gravitated to the desert, though.

People who belong to austere religious cults always have found it peaceful.

Ranchers who scoff at city life have homesteaded in the area.

Prospectors determined to discover a fortune have set up housekeeping.

Perhaps it is the scenery — stark and beautiful, untouched by the march of civilization—that holds them there.

Or perhaps they are enamored with the ruins of picturesque old stations along the way where arrowheads can still be found.

Whatever it is, they seem proud to call the land around the Pony Express trail "home." And they seem to enjoy having western history as their next door neighbor.